

Draper (W^m-H.)

MEMORIAL
OF
FOSTER SWIFT, M.D.,

READ BEFORE THE
NEW YORK MEDICAL AND SURGICAL SOCIETY

AT THE MEETING HELD AT
SANFORD HALL, FLUSHING, JUNE 19TH, 1875,

BY
WILLIAM H. DRAPER, M.D.

NEW YORK:

1875.

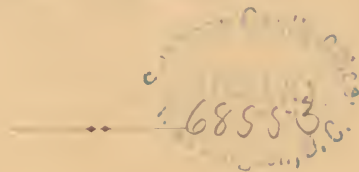
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MEMORIAL.

He whose memorial you have made it my sad privilege to inscribe on the records of this society, has been absent from us so long that, under ordinary circumstances, his membership might have been regarded as long since dissolved. But the hope that animated him whose death we now mourn, that he might yet return to his work and the fond companionship of his associates in this society, found a response in the hearts of all his friends: and though he authorized me, more than three years ago, to present his resignation, whenever the society thought proper to replace him by an active member, the question of dissolving his membership has never been suggested, because we have never abandoned the hope that he might return to us. I have reason to know that this silent but emphatic tribute of affection and sympathy on the part of this society was a constant source of gratification and encouragement to him in his long and weary struggle with disease. Almost to the last he cherished the hope that he might, perhaps, wrest from his relentless malady a shattered frame with which to exercise once more the art he so adorned, and dwell among those he so tenderly loved.

FOSTER SWIFT was born at Geneva, in this State, Oct. 31st., 1833. He was the youngest son of General Joseph G. Swift, of the United States Army, who was the first graduate of West Point, and a man distinguished through a long life for eminent military and civil services. Dr. Swift exhibited very early in life a predilection for the medical profession, which may be said, perhaps, to have been an inheritance from his grandfather, Dr. Foster Swift, whose name he bore, who was a Surgeon in the Army and Navy during the Revolutionary War, and afterwards a well-known practitioner in New London, Connecticut.

Dr. Swift's early education was received in his native town, and he graduated at Hobart College, Geneva, in 1852. During the last year of his college course he attended lectures in the Medical College at Geneva, but was dissuaded from continuing his medical studies after graduation, by his father, who thought him too delicate, physically, to endure the arduous labors of a doctor's life. To gratify his father he read law reluctantly for eight months, in the office of Judge Kent, in this city, and then, feeling the need of a more liberal classical and literary culture than he had obtained at Hobart College, he entered the Junior class at Harvard University, and graduated at that institution in the class of 1854, the subject of his inaugural thesis being "The Influence of Shakspeare's Plays on the Popular Estimation of Historical Characters." Thus furnished with the broad foundation of a liberal education and a fine literary taste, he resolved to gratify his early inclination to study medicine. In the fall of 1854, he became a favorite pupil of Dr. Willard Parker, and from that time until the summer of 1876, when he was prostrated by the disease which finally destroyed him, he gave himself with untiring energy and self-sacrificing devotion to the study and practice of his profession. He graduated at the college of Physicians and Surgeons, in the class of 1857. He immediately entered Bellevue Hospital, and served during two years on the same staff with his attached friend Dr. Edward

B. Dalton. In the spring of 1859 he established himself in private practice in this city. He had already passed the precarious period in the young doctor's course, and had begun to lay the foundation of a brilliant career as a teacher and practitioner, when the war broke out, in the spring of 1861, and animated by a loyalty which with him was something more than the contagious enthusiasm which pervaded the country at that time, he forsook his practice and went as Surgeon to the 8th Regiment of New York State Militia, in response to the first call for troops to defend the capitol. At the battle of Bull Run he and his staff were captured while in the performance of their duty, and being almost the only prisoners who were not taken in the act of hasty retreat, they were released on parole in the city of Richmond, by Gen. Beauregard, and, after a brief detention, returned on parole to their homes. Thus debarred from the privilege of further service in the army, Dr. Swift resumed the practice of his profession. In 1862 he married the daughter of Dr. Fitzhugh, of Livingston County, who with one child, a daughter, survives him. His success from this time was rapid and exceptionally brilliant. He was successively appointed physician to St. Luke's, and the Children's Hospital; Assistant to the Professors of Obstetrics in the College of Physicians and Surgeons, and afterwards Clinical Professor of skin diseases in the Bellevue Hospital College, and Professor of Obstetrics in the Long Island Medical College. He had thus obtained within the brief period of ten years, by his scholarly acquirements, by his ability as a teacher, and by his skill as a practitioner, a claim to the first rank in his profession. He had scarcely begun to enjoy the honor and rewards of his well-earned position, when, in the summer of 1870, after a season of untiring labor and peculiarly trying experiences, he began to exhibit the signs of the pulmonary disease to which he finally succumbed. Conscious as he was of the threatening nature of his malady, he worked on for some time, regardless of the affectionate warnings of his friends and medical advisers, and only reluctantly yielded to their counsels when he fainted in the Theatre at the Bellevue College, in the effort to fulfil an engagement to lecture in the opening session of that institution in the fall of 1870. He soon afterwards went to Europe, but returned in the spring of 1871, without material improvement in health. The winter of 1871-72 he passed on the Pacific Coast, in the congenial companionship of his friend, Dr. Dalton, whose brief but brilliant career he there saw closed. The following winter he passed in the south of France, where, having procured an authorization from the French government, he hoped to practice his profession. He returned to this country, however, in the spring of 1873, to visit his family, and his disease having made considerable progress, he was induced to remain at home, instead of returning to France as he had intended. His experience of the effects of a warm climate upon his disease not having been entirely satisfactory, he resolved to try the experiment of spending a winter in the northern part of this State, at Morrisville, in Madison County. He was so encouraged by the promising effects of a cold climate, that he purchased a house at Morrisville, and determined to abandon, for a time, all hopes of resuming his practice, and devote himself to the recovery of his health. In the summer of 1874, however, it became evident to him and to his friends that he was fast losing ground in the conflict with his disease, and last fall he decided to try again the effect of a warm climate. He went to the Island of Santa Cruz, where he passed a lonely winter, separated from his wife and child, and sustained only by the hope, which grew fainter day by day, of arresting the progress of his disease. The last weeks of his life were cheered by the presence of a sister who, with her husband and a nephew, went to him in the hope of bringing him back to his home to die. This hope was not abandoned until a few days before his death, when he began to fail so rapidly that he realized the near approach of death, and met it with cheerful resignation, and in the complete assurance of a Christian faith. He died on the 10th of May. His remains were brought

home, and now rest in the family ground at Geneva. Such is the brief record of a life of which we all knew the promise and now lament the untimely end. Dr. Swift's professional career, though too brief to be marked by any work which will perpetuate his name on the scroll of fame, was one that will leave a lasting and enviable impression on the memory of all who enjoyed his friendship, or the privilege of intercourse with him as a teacher or physician. He possessed in a high degree the intellectual and moral qualities which fit a man for the responsible office of a physician. Love of nature and loyalty to the truth were his pre-eminent characteristics. He was imbued with the true scientific spirit, and his professional acquirements, in all departments, as far as they went, were free from the chaff of speculation and hypothesis. He hated sham wherever he found it, whether it lay in the conceit of those who deceived themselves, or in the dishonest practices of those who sought to deceive others. He had all the qualities of a successful teacher, thorough honesty, large experience, liberal acquirements, and literary attainments, and there can be no doubt that the cause of sound medical education lost one of its ablest and most promising exponents in his early death. As a physician, it may be truly said, that few men in our profession possessed or deserved in a larger degree than Dr. Swift the confidence and affection of his patients. His gentle and winning address, his sagacity and skill as a clinical observer, his fertility of resources, and above all, his fidelity, commanded the affection, respect and absolute trust of all to whom he ministered. His work was always thorough, and he gave to his cases a thoughtful and laborious study, which distinguished him from the routine practitioner. His sense of professional duty was so high that he never counted the cost to his health in fulfilling it, and there is little question in the minds of his friends that he finally fell a victim to his untiring and self-sacrificing labors. This sense of professional duty in Dr. Swift was not dictated simply by a sympathetic nature, or by a desire to please or win the confidence of his patients, but mainly by a profound conviction of the responsibility he assumed, whenever he was called to the bedside of those who trusted themselves to his care. But to all who enjoyed the privilege of Dr. Swift's companionship, his remarkable social qualities gave a charm to his character which your memory of him will recall better than any words of mine. Who of us can forget his refined and genial presence; his humor, that would illumine tears, and the wit whose shafts were never poisoned with malice, but always gleamed with mirth? Cultivated beyond most men in our profession in general literature, and devoted to all that was pure and elevating in art, his conversation was always entertaining and often brilliant in the originality and keenness of his criticism. He was never commonplace, because he never borrowed his convictions from other men unless they accorded with his own observation, or had been first subjected to his own enlightened reflection. But with all his intellectual gifts and accomplishments, Dr. Swift possessed a kindly and sympathetic nature that was quick to share the sorrows as well as the joys of his friends. As in his professional relations there was no self-sacrifice too great for him to make in the discharge of what he recognized as his duty, so in his closer relations to his family and his friends there was a love and a loyalty that knew no bounds. The keenness with which he sometimes suffered from his sense of his professional responsibility was only exceeded by the painful sympathy with which he realized the trials of his friends. To the severe strain which he suffered from both of these causes in the last year of his practice, his illness, as I have before suggested, was doubtless largely due, and while we cannot but grieve that a man of so great promise is lost so early to our profession, and a friend of such genial and noble nature is gone from us in the fulness of his manhood, we have reason to rejoice that we were permitted for even a brief period to enjoy the privilege of his friendship, and the precious example of his character.

